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NORTH CHICAGO (CBS 2) The suburbs will be the site of a new war memorial that pays tribute to African Americans, who helped break the Navy's color barrier. The only surviving member of the "Golden 13" was there for the Monday announcement.

CBS 2's Jon Duncanson reports on why the memorial is in North Chicago.

They are the faces of the men who were there more than 60 years ago. They saw it as it happened.

One man, whose face never belied whatever racial tensions existed at the time, is the only one left alive of the "Golden 13" -- the first African Americans allowed into naval officer training.

So much has happened at Great Lakes since, but it was there during World War II that 13 officers in training were housed, fed and taught in one small building.

They were the first black Americans to be given an officer's roll in the long history of the United States Navy.

"They had the highest grades of any class, and the white officers made them take the test again because they didn't believe African American officers could outscore white officers," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk.

Kirk spent three years securing federal funding for a monument commending World War II naval vets to be built by African American navy vets on a small parkland block in North Chicago.

Their class picture appeared in Life magazine around time of the 1944 graduation.

Frank Sublett, 84, waves away questions about breaking racial barriers.

“It didn't bother me at all. My mother asked me about that, and I said I just want to go in there and do the best that I can for whatever I have to do,” Sublett said.

But it paved the way for the Colin Powell's of today -- something these men who were at Great Lake Naval Training Center witnessed before going off to fight the war in the Atlantic and Pacific.

“This is a long-awaited honor. Something that we prayed for, looked forward to,” said veteran Leroy Colston.

“This is one of the most important things that I ever had done for me. I never thought it would possibly come about,” said veteran Nathan Penn.

It finally did, and the monument is scheduled for completion sometime next year. The "Golden 13" became naval leaders long before President Harry Truman desegregated the military.

At the time of their graduation they received no ceremony. With Monday's official announcement some 60 years later, they got one.